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Entangling Rites: the Pattern of Experience in Cormac McCarthy's *All The Pretty Horses*

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The character of John Grady Cole in *All The Pretty Horses* marks a clear shift in McCarthy's choices for characterization. McCarthy has also operated a change of landscape from southeast to southwest in both his previous novel, *Blood Meridian,* as well as in his personal life. Indeed, even though *Blood Meridian's* theatre was largely built on western ground, his young hero, the never-baptized "kid," was eastern born, like McCarthy. If "the moral universe [...] remains [indeed] constant" through the shift in setting, John Grady must be acknowledged as the first genuine western hero, as he is the first to be western born and bred (McMurtry 143). His genuineness as a western male avatar is slightly challenged by his father's former eastern-ness. And despite John's authenticity as a westerner, it does not seem to be "the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven" as John Grady runs from Texas to find a new Eden in Mexico (*All The Pretty Horses* 17). There he lives the cowboy life on a Mexican ranch, experiences incarceration and then rejection from his girlfriend before he eventually goes back to his hometown in Texas.

Unfortunately, John Grady's expectations outrange the real opportunities he encounters. After his grandfather's death, his mother refuses to lease him the ranch on grounds that he is not old enough and must go to school. He must then follow up on his estranged mother and father, who are respectively a failed actress and an indebted poker player who have given up on their parental duties. Surrounded by such excellent examples of failed role models, John Grady departs for his initiation voyage to follow the pattern designed by his eponymous ancestor in 1872, and that of many pioneers at the time. He hopes as well to have "a ranch of his own, a lovely young wife, and 'all the pretty horses'" (Spurgeon 84). He ends up with none, wandering on a red-dusted wilderness which seems to wipe off his identity slowly,[1] after an eminently ritual trip as it opens and closes with episodes presenting basic rites: the funeral at the beginning and the wedding at the end. This reversal of rites shows an entangled pattern—weddings

[1] "They [*the Indians*] had no curiosity about him at all. [...] they watched him vanish upon that landscape solely because he was passing. Solely because he would vanish." *All The Pretty Horses* 301.

usually taking place, in one's life, before funerals—which symbolizes a paradox holding sway over all of the book.

John Grady indeed has a positive and optimistic attitude towards rituals as well as great ritualistic ambitions. However, he has little capacity in interpreting rituals and his frequent misinterpretation leads to recurrent failures in his journey. He refuses many times to be taught and to learn the lesson. Worse, he is gradually trapped within his course for rites accomplished: even though he succeeded at first in being courtly and shamanic, he is unable to maintain his status until the end of the novel. When he comes back to Texas, he is, echoing Coleridge's "Rime of the *Ancient* Mariner," a sadder and a wiser man, but not the proud survivor of a solitary heroic quest, most likely because the rites he performed were, like many of his actions, self-imposed and rudely entangled.

1. Which Path To the World to Come?

From the outside *All The Pretty Horses* gathers all the characteristics of a *bildungsroman*: there is a young hero, who starts out the novel with little experience and great expectations, passes various tests which challenge him either physically or psychologically, and in the end, he ends up a more perfected man than he was. The novel even opens with one of these ritualistic necessaries via John Grady's meditation at his dead grandfather's bedroom. The separation phase has started, and that scene puts forwards two major elements which will help John Grady set out on his journey: his quiet understanding of things past, and the paradox in him between the child too grown, and the man not grown enough.

John Grady's boyish clumsiness is strongly present in the opening scene. His consciousness of death seems to arise as the grandfather passes, as he is quite unable to distinguish death features in the room. His vision of the dead is quite unreal, he tries to convince himself that "that was not sleeping" (*All The Pretty Horses* 3). The work of the undertaker seems fake and farcical as if he had "drawn" upon the grandfather's face and put colours there that never existed (*All The Pretty Horses* 3). Death seems to have entered John Grady's life without him understanding what it truly implies. He tries to show signs of respect by taking off his hat, before he eventually acknowledges the pointlessness of his stereotypical behaviour.

The mirrored image, a recurrent motive in McCarthy's fiction, is also a pre-eminent device in that scene, which emphasizes John Grady's inability—for the time being—to really seize the importance of the death event and its relative rituals, which

would help him foresee the so often referred to "world to come."[2] The narrator makes evident references to the mirrored image through the *mise en abyme* of the paintings of dead predecessors, and also though the candle flame and its twisted image. John Grady scarcely knows who the people on the painting are; neither can he rightly interpret the significance of the candle and its image twisted in the pier glass lighted up by his mother. John Grady does not understand the meaning of this, nor the purpose of his mother's candle lighting, though he appreciates it. Those symbolic circular and reminiscent images do not "suggest [...] eternity, but rather, quite the opposite: the inevitability of death" (Scaggs 79). John Grady gets subtle hints at this.

He understands though that the "world to come" has a lot to do with history, as death increases suddenly his consciousness of time past, and new eras come. John Grady rides west in a "faint new horizon" (*All The Pretty Horses* 7) on the old Comanche road, as a metaphor for his transcendence of things past. Only then does he get the first glimpse that in this new world, history may equal death. His understanding remains unserious and superficial as he refers to the childish and "comicbook teeth loose" (7) of the horse skull, which somehow alleviates the tragic feeling of the moment. Indeed, John Grady is getting his historical conscience back, if he ever possessed one at all: Indians were slaughtered for Whites to have access to land, and now white pioneers, like the grandfather, have passed, and thus both groups are "pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only" (5). It seems the candle has shed a new light on his vision of the world and that he has indeed "come to the end of something" (5).

Once John Grady has realized the infiniteness of the world ahead, and the various possibilities that he must choose from, he must find a pattern to follow. Choosing a pattern, though, is just as hard for a western hero as it is for a western writer. The very definition of the "code of the west" is an opaque subject for anyone dealing with western criticism and therefore it is even harder for a western character to abide by it. On the other side of the narrative pond, writers also encounter a plethora of struggles as they aim to deal with a land that has been “thoroughly mythologized, made into a fiction" (Brenner 207). In the first place, John's quest aims to re-conquer with his father's help the ranch soon to be sold by his mother. Unfortunately, John's parents both

[2] "The world to come" are the final words of *All The Pretty Horses*, and an issue often discussed by scholars, most notably by Stacey Peebles in "What Happens to Country: The World to Come in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy," *Sacred Violence* 127–142.

fail at their roles and provide a pitiful example that urges John Grady to find another source of inspiration. The bonds between John Grady and his father are clearly reverted: it is John Grady who must give his dad a lift, or he who proposes to teach the father the art of chess. On the other hand, the father remains absolutely unable to facilitate John Grady's task, either with actions, or with words, as he is prostrated in his childish refusal to have an adult talk with the mother.

On the other branch of the family tree, the mother is also a great deceiver. She successively forsakes the men in her life, firstly her husband in 1942, then her father, as she wishes to sell out everything he ever owned, and lastly her son, as she is gone most of the time once the grandfather is dead, and lives in San Antonio where she has a part in an unsuccessful play. Besides the flagrant disinterest in her son, the character of the mother also emphasizes John Grady's early stage of development as he remains unmoved by art, and questions its genuine interest.[3] She also sets herself apart from her previous life, just like John's father who is no longer a husband or a patriarch, as she registers at the hotel under a different name than Cole. John Grady is left without any reliable parent because of the flouted role he plays to his dad, and the physical and patronymic abandonment of his mother.

The final treason that will push John Grady on the perilous roads of his south-western journey comes from his estranged girlfriend, Mary Catherine, who dumps him for an older boy who has recently acquired mobile maturity—a car. The only step he takes with her, he admits, is hand shaking with a woman. She challenges his manliness as she also denies him sex, which is one of the transition rituals he must accomplish in order to become a man.

John Grady is urged by all these signs to take stands and actions to become at last the man he wants to be and to follow the example of the grandfather, who was, to John Grady, mythologized through death. Brutal estrangement from the mother is, for Mircea Eliade, what initiates the separation rite, which is omnipresent in the opening pages of the book (Eliade 27). Traditional rituals hold sway over the beginning of the book, whether it is the separation from the grandfather through death, the transcendence of the father/son bond, or the renouncement from his mother. John Grady is entangled in his adolescence as he wishes to age faster and initially not to perform the journey he

[3] "He'd the notion that there would be something in the story itself to tell him the way the world was or was becoming but there was not. There was nothing in it at all." *All The Pretty Horses* 21.

must go through. Eventually he decides to leave Texas, but only after realizing that he had to leave anyway.

2. The Failed Larceny of Flesh:

Once John Grady is physically estranged from almost everything he thought familiar, he enters a transitional phase where he must grow as a man before he can reach back to his home. Unfortunately for John Grady, his pattern is rudely shattered as he initially wishes to elope, and does not plan on coming back. Thus, he leaves in real western fashion and like his grandfather. Pioneers indeed never intended to go, conquer, and come back in the end; they all went off west and stayed there. In that very sense, John Grady's voyage is different from traditional primitive rituals which always include a return: it gathers both elements of conquest – the pioneering model – and also elements of ritual establishment – the need to accomplish to gain a new status.

On the strict literary side, the evolution of the western narrative seems to have roughly followed the major ritual threefold step defined for the first time by Arnold Van Gennep in *Rites De Passages* in 1909: separation, transition, and incorporation. Of course criticism of primitive rituals cannot directly apply to rituals in our contemporary western novel; it thus may seem obsolete to force Van Gennep's theories upon our study today. Direct influences, though, cannot be denied, certainly thanks to McCarthy's conscience of American history, and the weight it plays in the text. Slotkin observes four successive genres in early American literary production: conversion, sacred marriage, exorcism, and finally regeneration through violence (Slotkin 179), and notes that all these genres involve the Indian character. Such genres have been modelled on Puritan experiences as the literary production of the Colonies consists mostly of memoirs and testimonies; yet such a scheme resembles John Grady's personal quest. How is it, then, that he fails at performing the right, purposeful rituals?

Firstly, his failure is neither immediate, nor exclusive. As demonstrated previously, his ritual conscience develops slowly, but does develop. John Grady also does not either fail at *everything* he seeks to achieve. His shamanic power is, for instance, very strong and a key to his advancement, which paradoxically will also trigger his fall. Let us note that a shamanic power involves a lot more than the common daily cares for horses and cattle provided by cowboys who were also trained to cure animals (Jacquin 103–104). John Grady possesses qualities highly superior to those of

the simple horseman, qualities which are shown at their full extent during the horse-breaking episode, when he and Rawlins break sixteen horses in four days:

> They did not smell like horses. They smelled like what they were, wild animals. He held the horse's head against his chest and he could feel along his inner thighs the blood pumping through the arteries and he could smell the fear and he cupped his hand over the horse's eyes and stroked them and he did not stop talking to the horse at all, speaking in a low steady voice and telling it all he intended to do and cupping the animal's eyes and stroking the terror out. *(All The Pretty Horses* 103–104)

John Grady's power over horses is great, almost divine,[4] and shows that he is indeed capable. Shamans have, according to Arthur Maurice Hocart, more powers and recognition than chiefs in American primitive tribes (Hocart 117). John Grady has thus managed to acquire excellent skills in a domain, and thus could at last claim his status as a man.

Yet the horse-breaking scene paradoxically raises both glory and troubles. It initially allows John Grady to perform his art in front of his peers and to earn respect. Thanks to his demonstration he is also offered a better job at the ranch for which he would have to leave Rawlins and live in the master's barn where he will meet Alejandra, the daughter of the ranch owner. John Grady is also given a positive and powerful role in the horse-breaking scene, an experience he considers as a very exciting challenge. Virginity is at the core of this passage, as if it foresaw the lake episode and John Grady's subsequent loss of virginity. When it comes to horse breaking, John Grady tries to be gentle and to sweet talk the animals to reassure them. He creates a bond of sensual trust between man and the animal. McCarthy's stylistic choices for this episode, which covers eight pages of the novel, are deliberately sensual to emphasize John Grady's deflowering of the horses who had not seen a man before. The riders are impatient to get to it, and start out on daybreak with clean clothes still wet from the laundry the previous night. There is also a great deal of passion and pain in this horse breaking, with the "hot sweet breathing" of the horses (*All The Pretty Horses* 103), the thumbs in the mouth, and the horses' tying up.

The paradox stands in the fact that John Grady is still a virgin as he deflowers the horses, and that his own sexual transcendence (the lake episode) is not narrated, but only implied. He has technically not had access to sex during the horse-breaking episode, even if this considerably increased his manliness; for instance it allows him to

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[4] "the voice of the breaker still running in their brains like the voice of some god come to inhabit them," *All The Pretty Horses* 105.

ride the stallion bareback which "gives him the illusion of potency, both in the sense of control and in the sexual sense" (Luce 59). His potency, at the time, is still an illusion, and when it is eventually challenged, it is merely for the "larceny of time and flesh" (*All The Pretty Horses* 141) without a talk from him except his answer to Alejandra's "me quieres?" question. His horse breaking—an idealized enactment of deflowering—echoes his own loss of virginity which is intimately linked to his miracle. John Grady has opened the passage gates in a reverted order, which may explain why he does not immediately acquire the sense of his new responsibilities. Dueña Alfonsa reveals to John Grady the sense of the sacred as she warns him about his relationship with Alejandra before they even have one and, though he agrees with her that he has responsibility for Alejandra's reputation, he refuses the lesson. He refuses to acknowledge the revelation of the sacred, a primary element in puberty rites to Eliade (Eliade 26), as he ignores the conduct the code imposes. It is the first time, however, that John Grady is given directions as to how to behave beforehand.

It is not the first time, on the contrary, that John Grady's actions or decisions cause greater mayhem than initially expected. Indeed, John Grady let Blevins ride with them, against Lacey's opinion (who rightly predicted that he would get them "thowed in the jailhouse" (*All The Pretty Horses* 41)). On the sole ground that he is an American, Blevins is admitted to the group, shares their food and spends the night with them, and it is only during the morning that an opportunity to test Blevins rises (John Grady does not have a say in this, it is all Rawlins) through the gun episode. Yet, Blevins was already admitted to the group by John Grady; Lacey only wished to know how much of a weight he would be, and was right to do so. Blevins would indeed have John Grady and Lacey thrown in jail before he himself is executed. It is the second time that John Grady is confronted with death, and this time, his behaviour is cowardly, silent, most likely reasonable. He disagrees of course, but cannot phrase it until Rawlins is stabbed during their incarceration.

Interestingly enough, the officer at the prison considers raping whores as his personal rite de passage accomplished to become an adult. He had been challenged by the whore who refused him, and he decided he would not let her. John Grady seems to remember the lesson taught by the corrupt officer, as he kills Lacey's assailant. John Grady seems to have understood at last that the culturally established "cowboy code of conduct (honesty, loyalty, courage)" is only "full of contradiction and hypocrisy" (Spurgeon 80). It seems obvious that John Grady does not deliberately choose the

officer's pattern as the model to follow during his incarceration, he does, however, choose to start regenerating through violence after his successive failures.

John Grady's aptitude as a shaman is challenged and ultimately terminated by his love relationship; his aptitude as a man is also reduced to naught as he is sent to jail for both his past (the failed recovery of Blevins' horse at the beginning of the book) and present crimes (the theft of Alejandra's virginity). John Grady's aptitude as a valiant warrior starts emerging thanks to the murder he commits in prison, but he still lacks this higher degree of self-knowledge and wisdom that one must acquire during his initiation journey. After his captivity with the Indians, Daniel Boone becomes indeed a more stoic, tactful, shrewd, and sensible man, but John Grady fails to follow such an example as he returns to the Mexican ranch once out of prison. He has become, like the Romantic hero, a "devotee of the primitive passions engendered by contact with wild nature [whereas] Boone abstracts a code of natural laws from the wilderness and brings these [...] under the control of his own civilized reason" (Slotkin 309–310).

3. Cursed in Blood and Cured with Blood only:

Slotkin makes a very interesting statement as he opposes the concept of the romantic hero to that of the sensible western man in the Boone paradigm, mostly due to their divergent attitudes towards responsibility and their ability to transcend their experience. John Grady faces such a dilemma as he must choose between accepting his fate or rejecting it. He has always been a great believer in one's intrinsic worth unaltered by time or adversity, as he has always highly considered the worth of "the blood and the heat of the blood that ran [men and horses]" (*All The Pretty Horses* 6). Blood even transcends nationality (John Grady claims that no one should care what country blood comes from (*All The Pretty Horses* 211)) and reduces the male/female dichotomy to a mere detail. For instance, when John Grady is discussing the new horse Don Hector wants to breed, he asserts that to him the mare's blood is just as important as the stallion's. John Grady is consistent in his personal belief in the importance of blood.

However, such a concept of blending is unconceivable in the human world. The Dueña Alfonsa refuses to have Alejandra's blood "tainted" (*All The Pretty Horses* 229) by making love with John, and so does Don Hector, as his voice is carried in Alfonsa's words. Alejandra's family places their honour in blood, which must neither be spoilt nor spilt, as the affair could result in a wedding, or worse, a pregnancy. History has taught Alfonsa, as well as others in her family, that love of the blood is foolish and greedy. It is

important to note, though, that Alfonsa does not despise John for his less-worthy blood, but she denies him the right to her niece because he is driven by blood, and impulses. John has indeed not shed blood for a decent purpose since the beginning, and even as he attempts to make their relationship serious and to marry her, he is disavowed because he is merely passionate. He has only fought *back*, he has opened the door to Alejandra but has not knocked at hers, he has witnessed death with a silent wrath inside of him. Once again, John Grady is unable to learn from the past, as he has always known the paradoxical value of blood. As early as page five does he state that blood is both a curse and a cure when saying the Indians, along with his people, were "pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only" (*All The Pretty Horses* 5).

The most striking episode which shows how uselessly blood can be spilt is the lesson of the Mexican Revolution that Alfonsa tries to teach John Grady. In McCarthy's mythology, Alfonsa was in love with Gustavo Madero, brother to the 1910–1913 Mexican President Francisco Madero. Their passion for freedom led them to a revolution which eventually causes their execution once another coup overthrows them. The very term of revolution is essential to the understanding of the reversion of evolution. When rebelling, Gustavo, Francisco, and John Grady have refused their status and attempted to improve their condition—Gustavo and Francisco have, of course, also attempted to improve the condition of their country. Their experience was a tougher one than John Grady's as their ultimate lesson was torture and death, which John Grady never experiences himself (Lacey is tortured, Blevins is shot). John Grady remains mostly unmoved by her story, as he would rather have died in prison than be released on the condition he never sees Alejandra again. He fails to apprehend and understand both history and his ritual lesson. He fails to understand that, again, blood is both cure and curse.

John Grady is unable to transcend the experience and learn the lesson. When he leaves the ranch after Alfonsa's sermon, he refuses to back down and tries to see Alejandra again, which he succeeds in. Unfortunately for him, *she* has learnt her lesson and, though she sees him again despite her promise never to, she refuses to leave and goes back to her family. Alejandra has understood the weight of history and has decided to follow the pattern she is urged to. In order to perform her own rites, she has stepped away from her family for an affair, has done her deed with John Grady, and has come back after sacrificing her love story. John Grady refuses to sacrifice or compromise. It is

only at the very end of the novel that he unravels the various strings of his past, once he is strictly forced into it and has no other way out.

Many critics have argued that John Grady struggles to distinguish reality from dreams. He surely struggles identically to accept history, and thus accept experience and learning. He initially had no better answer for Don Hector as he asked about the reason for his presence than his mere will to see the country. He never provides an adult answer to that question; McCarthy omits to state the motive when John Grady tells his story to the judge in the last part of the novel. In Mexico, John Grady has been faced with his dream come nightmare, and his journey has followed a pattern he has never thought he would follow. Stacey Peebles argues that Mexico helps John Grady "see the emptiness within him reflected in his environment" (Peebles 131). I would argue that Mexico has helped John Grady see that in this southwest environment, it is not the ritual that matters but the violence of the ritual.

Many primitive rites de passage in Africa and Northern America resort to violence to achieve a status of mystic death before the actual rebirth. The suffering might sometimes be as painful as torture (Eliade 78). Yet thanks to these violent rites, the young men become adults and deserve a place as such in the tribe. McCarthy tries to present the world as such in the novel. Experience and violence appear to be inextricably linked; consequently historical weight is strictly negative. Most of the historical events that are presented include death, or bloodshed, if not both. McCarthy not only mentions the Indians' slaughter, but also the death of many pioneers. He also uses the Mexican Revolution as a powerful metaphor to establish the lethal power of blood and passions within a man's mind. The power of the community overrules that of the individual and its infuriated passions. The ‘rites de passage’ that John Grady clumsily performs as he departs from his home, his journey into the Mexican wilderness, his laborious and unsuccessful attempt to court Alejandra and its consequences all imply violence, and are all self-imposed. Unlike the primitive tribes, no one urged him to leave and accomplish such deeds, his people most likely did not even care about it, as his return is quite unnoticed. He gives his testimony to the judge without glory or heroism. His father has not waited for his return and has passed away while he was gone. The Indians do not even comment on him as he rides: they "ha[ve] no curiosity about him at all" (*All The Pretty Horses* 301). John Grady has not become the proud man he hoped to be when he left. He has not even become a curiosity to Indians.

The final passage of the novel is very interesting, as it shows how John Grady has ultimately not been able to gain power over himself, his community, and even his narrative. McCarthy's stylistic and grammar choices reflect such helplessness:

> The desert he rode was red and red was the dust he raised, the small dust that powdered the legs of the horse he rode, the horse he led. In the evening a wind came up and reddened all the sky before him. (*All The Pretty Horses* 302)

Let us note that, even though John Grady is at the core of this passage, he seems overcome by the desert, the dust, the horse, and eventually the redness. John Grady cannot even be empowered by grammatical artefacts; he is a mere grammatical object to serve his environment and must pass and vanish, just as the Indians predicted as they saw him. However nothing is triggered by John Grady, but by Nature, or random chance. John Grady is not guided throughout his quest, and seems to have, by the end of the novel, understood the complexity of his finiteness.

We have questioned in the introduction how John Grady decided to pursue his own quest for identity, and whether his rites de passage would be righteously performed. We have established that John Grady's acceptance of temperance has been very strongly challenged, as he has refused for a long part of the narrative to give in. John Grady is driven by a paradox, the same paradox that stylistically drives the narrative. There is a death at the beginning, and a wedding at the end. Though other deaths occur at the end, they have no influence on John Grady, unlike the opening death. To Shakespeare, "death is the end of all*"* *(Romeo and Juliet* III, 3; 98), yet to McCarthy, death is a mere beginning. On the other hand, weddings are not such a blissful and uniting experience. McCarthy acknowledges that wedding is a rite de passage that enhances one's responsibility as he portraits the bride and groom as "clung" to one another, and aged instantly by the operation of a "sepia monochrome" (*All The Pretty Horses* 285). Yet the picture he depicts is one of pity and desolation, witnessed by an old man, sitting at a bench outside the wedding party.

John Grady resembles that man who echoes Coleridge's ancient mariner, doomed to tell his story to other men so that they could learn from him. They share the silent knowledge of the vile power of experience as they greet each other discreetly.[5]

[5] "A man sitting alone on one of the benches who seemed no part of the wedding looked up at the sound of the slow hooves in the road and raised one hand to the pale rider passing with blanket and rifle and he raised a hand back and then rode on." *All The Pretty Horses* 285.

The married couple has learnt all the experience that seems needed for marital life in the fraction of the second in which the photograph is taken. They are not really more experienced, they are only a binomial, clutched to one another. John Grady may not have passed such tests, but in the end, those who have passed such tests do not seem wiser than him. Violence has entered the sphere of John Grady's world, who from now on regards the world as an alien place where he does not belong.

John Grady seems to slowly pull out the strings that entangled his rites and that blurred his notion of experience. He becomes a sadder and certainly wiser man, even though he does not achieve the Boone-like purpose that the western representative must, according to Slotkin, attain. He remains a solitary Romantic, not a selfless hero who haggardly wanders through the wilderness. As *Cities Of The Plain,* the final tome of the Trilogy, shows, it will take John Grady quite a while to settle, but he will never agree to settle for average, or compromise. It is not in the end a failure for John Grady, but merely an adjustment of his ritual ambitions to his personal intrinsic beliefs and values.

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